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PRESENT STATUS OF THE ARGUMENT FOR LIFE AFTER DEATH.

BY BORDEN PARKER BOWNE.

IT is often said that faith in a future life is increasingly difficult. This is probably the case with certain elderly persons who were entangled in the materialistic thinking of the last generation and have never been able to free themselves. They contracted the habit of negation, and at last came to regard their denial as a manifest truth. In fact, however, the belief in life after death is better founded to-day than it ever was in the past, so far as science and reasoning go.

The argument against the belief is level to the lowest intellect and seems conclusive to the uncritical. It is simply this. We know of mental life only in connection with bodily existence. When the body dies there is no longer any mental manifestation. And from this the conclusion is drawn that the mental life is only a product of physical organization and perishes with it. This is really the sum of the argument upon the subject. As music depends on the instrument and ceases with it, so what we call mind is only the tune of the organism and vanishes with its dissolution.

The facts, however, are by no means so simple and decisive as this argument assumes. It is strictly impossible to pass by any reasoning or insight from the body as a material aggregate to thought and feeling as spiritual states, and the only thing that makes it seem possible is the tacit assumption that the body is an undoubted cause and indeed the only cause concerned. But this naïve materialistic metaphysics is obsolete in critical circles. We really do not see that the body causes the mental life or that it is necessary to it. All that we really know is that the organism and the mental life are mutually dependent in the order of ex-

perience. We find them varying together, but we cannot find any inner connection which would compel us to think that the actual physical order must be attended by the actual mental order or by any mental order at all. So far as knowledge goes, all that we can certainly say is that the organism is the medium between the physical world and the inner life, preparing the forces of the former for the service of the latter and furnishing the latter with a means of expression and communication. The subject of this inner life we call the "soul," and by "soul" we mean nothing mysterious or far-fetched, but just ourselves as we live our daily life of thinking, feeling, working, etc.

Manifestly, this statement of the relation between soul and body carries with it all the facts upon which the materialistic argument is based. If the organism is now such a means of mediation between the physical world and the soul, it is plain that the health and perfection of the organism must have a profound significance for the soul's life. If we suppose that the body furnishes the soul with the stimulus for growth and development, it is clear that physical conditions must have great mental significance; and if we further suppose that the body is the instrument for the expression and manifestation of the mental life, it is equally clear that the condition of the organism must have great significance for that life. The operator cannot work without his instruments or send messages when the wires are down. So far, then, as the facts of mental dependence upon physical conditions go, it is manifest that at best they lead only to a drawn battle, and if nothing but these facts existed we should be left free to choose either the materialistic or the spiritualistic view.

But there is, however, a great set of facts that come in to overturn this equilibrium. The soul is by no means always in the passive voice, even in its physical relations. Not only does the body affect the mental life, but conversely the mental life reacts upon the body and becomes an important factor in its direction and general well-being. This truth has become prominent of late through the facts of mind cure and the growing insight into the organic significance of the mental factor. These facts were long denied, owing to materialistic prepossessions, but they have compelled recognition. Some wild work has, indeed, been done in this field, but enough has been established to show that mental

conditions have great importance for our physical well-being. And one great gain from it is that we are becoming used once more to the thought of spiritual existence as a veritable factor in the ongoing of the world. In addition to such facts, reflection upon the thought-life itself shows that it is altogether impossible without some abiding and active spiritual principle whereby the thought-life is built up and continually maintained across the changes in its organic conditions.

The spiritualistic argument is conclusive for those who can follow it, but popular thought is obsessed by difficulties arising purely from the imagination. This faculty always thinks in terms of form, and when dealing with human personality it thinks in terms of human form; hence whenever the soul is referred to as something formless and invisible the imagination has difficulty in realizing what all this may mean. It seeks to picture the soul and the soul cannot be pictured. We cannot apprehend ourselves in spatial images, we experience ourselves in conscious life and activity. This failure of the imagination easily passes with the uncritical for a disproof of spiritual existence. Along with this goes the naïve assumption that matter is a perfectly clear notion, and that material existence is something the nature and reality of which are beyond all question. For the strengthening of popular faith in spiritual realities something may be done toward relieving these difficulties by showing the uncertainty of our notions of matter and the activity of the soul in physical as well as mental life.

Popular thought begins by assuming that matter is the most certain of all things. Spirit may be doubted, but material things are undeniably there. This is the conviction with which we all begin and it very easily leads us toward mechanical and materialistic thinking. The view, however, is inverted. The only sure facts in life are ourselves and the world of common experience, the human world in short. This is where we really begin and where life itself goes on; and all thinking whatever that we may do must be related to these facts, and whatever we believe must in some way be deduced from these facts. Matter, then, as a metaphysical existence is no first fact, but only an abstraction from experience. Life and experience are the first facts. Now with this starting-point we find ourselves living, thinking, feeling, acting and producing a great many effects in

the world of experience. We are in this world depending upon it in some ways and able to act upon it and modify it in some ways. The physical world, then, is far from independent of our thought and action. We, the living persons, modify the world of things, use it for our purposes, build cities, traverse seas, subdue nature to our service, develop governments, social institutions, etc.; and in all of this we find ourselves given as active and controlling causes. The fancy that some materialists have held that this is only an illusion may be dismissed at once.

Men, then, as living souls are no fictitious and far-fetched hypotheses, but are really the very first and most certain facts in speculation, and the abstract matter of scientific theory, so far from being a datum of experience, is only a piece of doubtful metaphysics for the explanation of experience. Moreover, at present the tendency is to extend the activity of the soul much farther than has hitherto been done. Instead of making the soul a mere collective name for mental states which passively attend organic change, or even limiting the soul's action to conscious mentality, the tendency now is to regard the soul as the builder even of the body itself. Organic form is not the cause but the product of life. Life lies behind structure as its source and builder. This is the view which is coming to the front in biological speculation.

According to this view, the soul has a phase of organic activity which precedes and underlies its conscious activity, but both are united as the expression of the nature of the one soul. We may distinguish the following stages:

First, The soul in interaction with the general physical system builds and maintains an organism within certain limits and under certain conditions set by its own nature and the general laws of the system.

Second, This organic matter is already within the sphere of the soul's activity as well as under the general physical laws.

Third, Hence the organism is partly a physical and partly a psychical function. Its interaction with the extra-organic involves the organic activity of the soul, and, because of the unity of the soul, this interaction could hardly fail to have significance for the mental activity.

Fourth, Conscious activity based upon and growing out of the organic activity is the final stage.

Thus the continuity of the organic and the mental world is

in a measure assured and some reason is given for their intimate correlation. This view provides for all the psychologists are now saying about the subliminal and subconscious soul, as it recognizes an organic activity which does not rise into conscious activity, but which nevertheless may have profound significance for the conscious life. It also provides some connection between the conscious and the organic in turn. As the organic form of activity has significance for the conscious form of activity, so the conscious activity has significance for the organic. Thus we see how physical states might conceivably condition organic states and through them mental states, and conversely how mental states might condition organic states and through them physical states.

This is the view that is becoming quite prominent in biological and psychological speculation, and on any realistic scheme of metaphysics it is the line of least resistance. It recognizes the reality and activity of the soul and assigns to it not merely a mental but a profound vital significance. It gives the soul something to do. The soul does not merely sit by and think, but it enters intimately into the activities of the system and counts for something as a dynamic factor. It does not, indeed, create the cosmic forces, but within limits it directs them and determines their products. Thus the soul appears among the working factors of the system and not as a superfluous and impotent spook in the cosmic ongoing. This is the view taken by men like Sir Oliver Lodge in his papers on Science and Immortality, and it is closely related to the views of Bergson and others who have discovered the limitations of the old mechanical notions respecting life and mind.

The soul, then, is a reality among realities so far as the argument thus far goes, and as such would come under the general law of thought respecting these realities. In the physical world, on the orthodox view, there is no destruction of reality, but only change of combination. So-called destruction is dissolution or decomposition and applies only to compounds. The destruction of a piece of wood means merely a recomposition of the molecules and leaves the essential factors untouched. If now we regard the soul as also one of the real factors of the world of power, or as a real agent, we should on this line of reasoning regard it as equally indestructible; for destruction, as said, means in the physical world only decomposition, and the soul as a simple agent

would admit of no decomposition and hence would be indestructible like the other realities of the cosmic order. These considerations led long ago to an argument for the immortality of the soul based on its being a simple substance, an argument which Kant subjected to criticism, with the result of showing that it cannot be called a demonstration. At the same time, it must be said that it is by no means altogether a failure, for when once the reality of the soul as an agent is established there is at least a presumption that it continues to be unless we can give positive proof of its destruction. This presumption becomes very strong for all those scientists who have learned to think of the agents and energies of the physical system as indestructible. The mere fact that the soul does not manifest itself to us outsiders through our senses is very far from a proof of its non-existence, for nowadays science has made us entirely familiar with the fact that a great many things exist which are not revealed to the senses at all. Thus the world of ether, which is by no means a sense object, has become so important a fact in physical science that it is continually threatening to supplant matter altogether by reducing it to a function of ethereal motion. Wireless telegraphy is a good illustration of changes and activities beyond the range of sense.

By moving along this line critical thought is making matter itself more and more a fluid fact and mind more and more substantial. A very general tendency in physics is to make matter phenomenal or at least to make it a function of something beyond itself. According to Professor Trowbridge, about all we are sure of in connection with matter is that it is "a back-and-forth motion in the ether." Lord Kelvin thought it might be a vortex ring in the ether, and in any case matter is losing its hard and fast character and becoming a function of energy. According to Mr. Spencer, the one sure thing is that we are in the presence of one infinite and eternal energy on which all things depend and from which they forever proceed. Now this is a long way from the crude materialism of earlier times, and all that would be left of materialism, if put into these terms, would be the claim that our mental life is now connected with certain orders of cosmic change acting upon them and reacted upon by them, but in such a way as to make it altogether impossible to look upon the cosmic change as the efficient cause of the mental life. Thus

the way would be left open to think that this mental life which has these mysterious connections at present and which is continually rooted in the infinite and eternal energy (God?) might continue under other conditions according to the purpose of that same infinite and eternal energy by which it now exists.

And this conclusion would be further helped by the insight to which criticism brings us into the phenomenal character of the entire spatial system. For common-sense things in space are the only realities. These we see, touch and handle, and as there is nothing else in sight there is nothing else in existence. What we have already said goes far to shake this naïve view, and speculation has carried the matter still further by showing that space itself is simply the general form of our experience and no real existence which holds and conditions things. And even now the great bulk of life belongs in the invisible world of consciousness and conscious personal relations without any existence whatever in space. The human personality never appears. The human race never appears in space. Space is simply the screen on which the invisible life of humanity projects itself, producing a great variety of effects and expressing itself in various ways, but never coming into vision except through these manifestations. We have only to extend this to understand how the entire universe may be an invisible world of spiritual energy manifesting itself in spatial forms, yet never to be identified with them. In that case the personal world would be the real world and the space world would be the form world in and through which the real world of spirits manifests itself; and this is the view to which thought is rapidly coming.

Considerations of this kind tend to relieve the difficulties of popular thought respecting immortality. That thought tacitly assumes that all real existence has spatial form and that whatever does not exist for the senses is unreal. There is relief in pointing out the phenomenal character of spatial existence in general, and in showing how much there is of which the senses take no account and make no report. What can the senses tell us, for instance, of the metaphysical basis of wireless telegraphy or the power world in general. As to the possibilities of spiritual life, we have no more warrant for limiting them to present physiological conditions than an unborn philosopher would have for declaring the antenatal life to be the only one possible. It would

be interesting to work out the conclusions of such a philosopher respecting the possibilities of conscious life. We should recognize in them a striking parallel to the views of some of our materialistic dogmatists.

This argument is indeed negative, but it is not without positive value, as it tends to remove the baseless fancies on which objections commonly rest. Of course it must be admitted that there is no proper demonstration of life after death, and indeed there can be none except through some word of revelation or through experience itself. But this does not leave us as badly off as it might seem. We no longer expect demonstration in concrete matters of any kind. Even science itself rests upon a very complex body of assumptions admitting of no demonstration beyond the fact that they satisfy our rational nature and give us some light on experience. Similarly with the faith in immortality—it is not a thing which can be properly demonstrated, but it is something that fits into our general scheme of faith and satisfies the instinctive demands of the soul. We have come to a point at last where we are trusting our instincts again, our higher spiritual instincts as well as the lower ones, and in this trust we are finding ourselves led more and more to faith in immortality. We have the sure conviction that moral and spiritual interests are the higher things in life, and we have also the clear conviction that these interests find no adequate completion and fulfilment in the life that now is. There is much, of course, that is animal in our life, but there is also much that soars above and beyond all animal possibility. We are somewhat in the position of a being who should become conscious of his surroundings in the antenatal state. He would find many things the significance of which would be dark to him because they are preparations for a stage of existence of which as yet he has no knowledge. But after birth he would find their meaning, as he would be introduced into a life where their significance would be manifest. In the same way our reason, our conscience, our spiritual aspirations, carry us beyond the actual and beyond all that is possible under terrestrial conditions. These are the things within us that bear witness to immortality. All thinking about the world presupposes it to be rational, and if life is to end with the earthly act, then the play is a farce, a hideous opera bouffe, and there is no reason in it. Considerations of this kind, while they disclaim knowledge,

open the way for belief and make us hospitable to the notion of immortality if it should be revealed.

And here it is that Christianity has done a great service. It has made the idea of immortality and belief in it a common possession; and by its continual testimony to the life immortal has made it credible to the great mass of men who could reach it in no other way. And it is something to see that science and reflection, so far as they go, support this faith. They do not, indeed, compel it, but they make it rationally possible and show the emptiness of the pretended disproofs of the doctrine. And then the individual has to decide for himself whether to take the higher view that leads to life and hope or the lower view that leads to despair and death. And probably this is all that is desirable for us under our present circumstances. The supposed proofs of spiritual existence that come from spirit rappings and such things are not of much use to us. They cannot be declared to be impossible, though I myself have never seen anything that makes them credible. But their contents are of such a character as to depress rather than encourage us. It is further clear that for the sake of our mental, moral and religious sanity it would not do for us to have much commerce with the invisible world. Neither intellect nor morals nor religion could go on in any wholesome manner if we had much more knowledge than we now possess. As Kant says, in speaking of this point, the unsearchable wisdom of God is no less manifest in what he has hidden from us than in what he has revealed.

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